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THE FIRST UTAH COINS MINTED FROM CALIFORNIA GOLD

By REVA HOLDAWAY STANLEY

WHEN the Mormon pioneers reached the Valley of the Great Salt Lake late in July of 1847, the only coins they possessed were \$87.00 in United States coinage in the possession of Brigham Young. In the Utah wilderness at that time, there was no need for a medium of exchange, but with each succeeding company which came into the Valley, the necessity for some such medium became increasingly apparent. In 1848, immigrants arrived by the thousands, and in the fall of that year Brigham Young found a way to fill this need.

In January of 1848, gold was discovered at Coloma, in California. Most of Sutter's employees at the time were former Mormon Battalion men. Various groups of these had begun drifting homeward over the Sierra by the first part of July, and by October they had begun to arrive in the Great Salt Lake Valley. The former members of the Battalion were supplemented by small companies of Mormons who had come to San Francisco on the ship *Brooklyn* in 1846, under the leadership of Samuel Brannan, and had later moved to Mormon Island to work rich claims, from whence they came direct to the new "Zion." All of these arrivals brought gold dust from California, which was welcomed by Brigham Young as the answer to his problem of providing his people with a medium of exchange.

The "Utah Early Records"¹ have this to say:

On the 13th [of November, 1848] fifteen Battalion men arrived from California. During the month several other small companies arrived. Some of them brought considerable gold dust with them.

[On the 19th of November, 1848] preparation was made to make coin of the gold dust brought from California.

On the 25th Brigham Young, John Taylor and John Kay (a blacksmith) made out an inscription for the gold currency. . . . on one side "Holiness to the Lord" with an emblem of the Priesthood. On the reverse the words "Pure Gold" and the value of the coin, surrounding two hands clasped, representing friendship.

The *Juvenile Instructor* describes these coins as having a beehive and spread eagle on one side, with inscription, "Deseret Assay Office, Pure Gold," and at the base, "5D." On the other side was a lion surrounded by, "Holiness to the Lord" in the characters of the Deseret alphabet.² This can hardly be true, for the Deseret alphabet was not invented so early as the year 1848.

Bancroft² says that the dies and "everything connected with the coining were made in Salt Lake City," but that the crucibles broke and for the time being the attempt to coin money was abandoned. "Nebeker's Early Justice" said that "John Kay coined \$2.50, \$5 and \$20 pieces."² It seems likely, there-



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fore, that some coins were successfully made before the crucibles broke, although there were not enough for any use, other than to say that they were actually made.

The "Records" continue:

As there was considerable gold dust in the possession of various persons in the City and there were no more crucibles in which to melt any more of it, and currency of some sort was greatly needed, it was resolved in a public meeting on the 28th [of December, 1848] that Brigham Young should issue notes for circulation on dust deposited with him, the notes to be redeemed when the dust was coined.

In the latter part of the month a number of one, three and five dollar bills were prepared and signed.

[1849] On the first of January the first bill [one dollar] of local paper currency was issued. The Bills were signed by Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and Thomas Bullock, clerk.

Evidently there were not enough of these bills to fill the need, and other ways of providing currency in a hurry were sought. On the 6th of January, resolutions were passed by the Council to the effect that "Kirtland bank bills be put into circulation for the accommodation of the people, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph, that the Kirtland notes would one day be as good as gold."² These Kirtland Bank Bills had been issued by Joseph Smith as Cashier of the Kirtland Safety Bank, which had failed in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1838. Joseph had not foreseen that it would be California gold which would make those bank notes of value.

There was a need for small money, and on January 22, 1849, "Brigham Young and Thomas Bullock were engaged in setting type for the 50 cent bills, paper currency, the first type-setting in the Great Basin." All this paper currency, backed by California gold, was used as money until enough legal tender of the United States came into the Valley to replace it; then it was recalled and destroyed. However, another attempt was made to coin the gold at a later time.

An entry for April of 1849 in the "Records" says:

On the return of a portion of the "Mormon Battalion" through the northern part of Western California, they discovered an extensive gold mine, which enabled them, by a few days' delay, to bring sufficient of the dust to make money plenty in this place, for all ordinary purposes of public convenience, in the exchange the brethren deposited the gold dust with the Presidency, who issued bills, or a paper currency; and the "Kirtland Safety Funds" re-signed, is on a par with gold.

A few months later, a second attempt was made to coin gold, which this time was attended with more success. J. M. Barlow, a jeweler, was requested by Brigham Young to make a set of dies for \$5 pieces, and for a number of years he refined the gold and coined it into money.³ Coins of \$2.50, \$10 and \$20 were also minted, although by whom is not of record. These were made of pure gold without alloy, most of the historians claim, although some say there was a little silver used. However, they were deficient in weight as compared with United States coins. They had not the symmetry nor the beauty of the United States coins, and they never had any general usage. They were eventually sold to the Federal mints as bullion.

Jacob R. Eckfeldt and William E. DuBois, who were assayers of the Mint for the United States, received some of these coins on January 10, 1850:

THE MORMON COINS have just been received, through a gentleman who came overland from Great Salt Lake in eighty-one days. They consist of 20, 10, 5, and 2½ dollar pieces. In fineness they are about 899 thous., with little variations; and they contain only the native silver alloy. The weights are more irregular, and the values very deficient. The 20 dollar piece weighs from 436 to 453 grains, value \$16.90 to \$17.53. The 10 dollar, 219 to 224 grains, \$8.50 to \$8.70. The 5 dollar, about 111 grains, \$4.30. The 2½ dollar, about 58 grains, \$2.25.

On one side of the coins is HOLINESS TO THE LORD, with a large eye, and something like a mitre; on the other, two hands in friendly grasp, with the date 1849, and a legend containing the alleged value, and the initials G. S. L. C. P. G., meaning GREAT SALT LAKE CITY, PURE GOLD. The ten dollar piece has PURE GOLD, in full.⁴

In a later edition of their book, published in 1851, these Federal assayers added the following comment:

Although there is much irregularity both in weight and fineness, the denominations are tolerably in proportion to each other. A parcel made up of all sizes, and counting \$562.50, yielded at the mint \$479.20; say \$8.52 to the ten dollar piece. The fineness was 886.⁵

With the crude machinery to be had in Utah at the time, it is not particularly strange that the weights should be different from Federal specifications. Since they were designed for internal use in the Territory, they were accepted at full value, and it is doubtful that many of them found their way to other communities except as they were sold to the mints.

Few of the old people in Utah remember these coins. It seems, then, that the currency was used instead of the coins and was still in usage as late as the sixties. In any exchange between Mormon and outside communities, it is probable that the California gold dust was used in preference to the coined gold.

NOTES

1. "Utah Early Records," MSS, Bancroft Library.
2. Bancroft, *History of Utah*, p. 291.
3. Whitney, *History of Utah*.
4. Eckfeldt, Jacob R., and DuBois, William E., *New Varieties of Gold and Silver Coins, Counterfeit Coins and Bullion; with Mint Values*, Philadelphia, 1850, p. 61.
5. *Ibid.*, New York, 1851, p. 9.